

entially radical event? Nasr is unclear on this point, but his implied argument is that the radical tone of Khomeinism—voiced today by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—retains purchase among Shiites only because of long mutual enmity between Iran and the West. If the West, and especially the United States, would forgive Tehran its transgressions in the fervor of revolution and deal in good faith with the pragmatists in the clerical hierarchy, the likes of Ahmadinejad would eventually lose their cachet. This, too, is a familiar realist argument, and both Takeyh (*Hidden Iran*) and British-Iranian scholar Ali Ansari (*Confronting Iran*) have devoted their very useful volumes to its explication. No detailed treatment of Sunni-Shiite tensions, or Shiism for that matter, is necessary to comprehend the trajectory of the US-Iranian confrontation. With their focus on Iranian nationalism, Takeyh and Ansari are better, though not more encouraging, guides to this subject than Nasr.

Viewed through the regional prism, Nasr's disdain for the "Sunni" worldliness of Khomeinism raises another question: Why do Middle Easterners, including Sunni Islamist parties like Hamas but also large segments of Sunni Arab populations, regard Shiite Islamist militancy with admiration? One important answer surely lies in the conflict over Palestine, left to fester by Arab regimes obsessed with their own security and subservient to Washington, while Iran and Hezbollah position themselves rhetorically (and seek to transcend sectarian divisions) as the redoubtable defenders of Muslim Jerusalem. At a deeper level, the Islamic Revolution's ouster of the Shah, Ahmadinejad's insistence on Iran's right to enrich uranium and Hezbollah's "divine victory" over Israel in 2000 and 2006 are perceived as rare triumphs over colonial encroachment, moments when Arabs and Muslims wrote history instead of having it written upon them.

It is instructive, however, that Hassan Nasrallah's preferred narrative for interpreting Iraq, *divide et impera*, is highly contested in the Arab world, where many see the malign hand of Iran as well as an illegal US occupation. The Iraqi government is widely viewed as a puppet of the United States or Iran or both. Anti-Shiite sentiments have spread through virulent, Salafi-run TV channels operating in Iraq, as well as through the Iraqi refugees' tales of targeting by death squads. The most popular satellite channel, Al Jazeera, has been banned from Iraq since 2004 because of its alleged sympathies for Sunni rebels,

and hundreds of Shiites recently demonstrated in Najaf against its portrayal of Ayatollah Sistani. Among Iraqi Shiites, meanwhile, the old questions of identity and relation to the state are far from settled by the Shiite revival. Notions of Arabism and Iraqi nationalism exert a powerful pull alongside Islamism and sectarian pride. Indirect evidence of the vigor of these debates came in mid-May, when the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, in a subtle distancing from its place of exile in Iran, changed its name to the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council and scaled back its demands for a Shiite mega-province in the south. According to Reidar Visser, a prominent scholar of Iraqi Shiism, party members took these steps "to stress their Iraqiness."

Whatever the outcome of these debates, and whatever horse Washington eventually bets on in the Green Zone, Nasr and Nakash are undoubtedly correct that the rise of the Iraqi Shiites promises to be a lasting feature of the strategic landscape, along with the heightened clout of Iran and Hezbollah's prominent role in Lebanon's confessional politics. These developments are not solely understandable in sectarian terms, but they have been understood that way by key elites in the Middle East, most

visibly in Amman, Cairo and Riyadh. Not only did the Saudis loosen the reins on the excommunicators among the Wahhabi clergy; columnists in the quasi-official press organs of Egypt and Jordan also flirted with the sectarian analysis emanating from the palaces there. Since late 2006 cooler heads have seemingly prevailed. On the clerical level, the respected Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi has convened a series of meetings between prominent Sunni imams and Shiite mullahs to find common theological ground. On his website, Qaradawi dismissed the early April meeting as a "conference of empty compliments" but stressed the importance of continuing dialogue "for the preservation of Muslim unity." On the state level, Saudi and Iranian diplomats are widely believed to have talked down Lebanese Sunni and Shiite parties from the brink of extended street fighting over the disputed composition of the Lebanese cabinet. Still, with the Lebanon crisis unresolved, Iraqi refugees languishing in Jordan, Syria and elsewhere, and no end in sight to the Iraqi maelstrom, the shadow of sectarianism is far from lifted. The Bush Administration's Iraq adventure has unleashed volatile transformations in the Middle East whose direction is impossible to predict or control. ■

Iraq's Founding Mother

CHARLES GLASS

GERTRUDE BELL: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations.

By Georgina Howell. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 481 pp. \$27.50.

During the frozen winter of 2003 in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, Ahmad Chalabi was waiting for the United States to invade his country. He was reading, among other books, a biography of Gertrude Bell, *prima inter pares* of the British founders of modern Iraq. The book, *Desert Queen* by

Janet Wallach, included a passage that Chalabi liked so much he read it aloud to me beside an open fire at his safe house in Sulaimaniya. In the anecdote he selected from *Desert Queen*, Miss Bell was listening to the aged Abdul Rahman al Gailani, who, as the Naqib of Baghdad, was a respected Sunni Muslim religious figure. The Naqib

addressed her as "Khatun," or Lady (from the Turkic word for a noblewoman), in Baghdad on February 6, 1919, two years after Britain conquered the old Abbasid capital but before it had presented its plans for postwar government. Speaking in Arabic, he said to her,

Your nation is great, wealthy and powerful.... Where is our power?... You are the governors and I am the governed. And when I am asked what is my opinion as to the continuance of British rule, I reply that I am the subject of the victor. You, Khatun, have an understanding of statecraft. I do not hesitate to say to you that I loved the Turkish government

Charles Glass (www.charlesglass.net), *ABC News's* chief Middle East correspondent from 1983 to 1993, covered the 1991 and 2003 American wars against Iraq for ABC. He is the author of *Tribes With Flags* (*Atlantic Monthly*), *Money for Old Rope* (*Picador*) and *The Tribes Triumphant* (*HarperCollins*).

when it was as I once knew it. If I could return to the rule of the Sultans of Turkey as they were in former times, I should make no other choice. But I loathe and hate, curse and consign to the devil the present Turkish Government. The Turk is dead; he has vanished, and I am content to become your subject.

Chalabi was gambling that the Naqib's stance toward the British in 1919 would serve as the model for Baghdad's reception of his American allies in 2003. However, even in 1919, the Naqib was in the minority. A year later, most of the population of what became Iraq took up arms against the British. Yet Miss Bell had chosen to listen to the Naqib, albeit selectively. Washington too preferred, over more skeptical Iraqis, the assurances of Chalabi's friend and political ally Kanan Makiya, who told George Bush that the Iraqi people "will greet the troops with sweets and flowers." As events unfolded, Iraq's greeting consisted more of bombs than sweets.

Washington's ideologically charged neoconservative coterie possessed little knowledge or understanding of the Middle East, allowing it to dismiss the easily predictable consequences of invading and occupying Iraq. (There were precedents it might have heeded: In the 1980s, in particular, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, most of them Shiites who could have been expected to sympathize with revolutionary Iran, died fighting the Iranian invasion.) But a woman as intelligent and informed as Gertrude Bell lacked the alibi of ignorance. She had traveled around the country for years, and she knew it better than almost any other Westerner. Her design to force the Arabs—both Sunni and Shiite—and Kurds into an artificial state under British dominion was doomed to plunge the country into war. She, along with the other competent British Arabists in the Baghdad administration, refused to see the inevitable fallout of imposing the son of Britain's wartime ally, Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca, upon them in 1920. Even the Naqib had warned her that he "would rather a thousand times have the Turks back in Iraq than see the Sharif or his sons installed here."

Bell imagined that Hussein's son Faisal, who had fought for the British against Turkey during World War I and been expelled from Syria by the French afterward, would be acceptable to most Iraqis. While the Kurds were unlikely to welcome an Arab head of state under British tutelage, she believed that the Shiite Arabs would see in Faisal a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through their much-

revered Ali and that the Sunni Arabs would take him as one of their own. The Naqib, whose advice she ignored, had warned her, "The Hejaz is one and the Iraq is one, there is no connection between them but that of the Faith. Our politics, our trade, our agriculture are all different from those of the Hejaz." It was her intention to make Iraq governable by creating what the British would call the "two majorities" out of three communities. The theory allowed any group to combine with another, allowing the two to constitute a majority. Thus, Arab and Kurdish Sunni Muslims could dominate the Arab Shiites; conversely, if the two Arab communities, Shiite and Sunni, combined, they would have a majority over the Kurds. Iraqis were never able to exercise majority rights because cliques, mainly but not exclusively Sunni Arab, governed the country under the British, the monarchy and the Baath Party without reference to majority rule or any other notion of democracy. When elections were finally held, under the American occupation, the Sunnis boycotted them—leaving the Shiites and Kurds to constitute the government, a combination that defied ethnic and religious differences that the British had not anticipated.

In 1920, when Britain made clear its intention to rule without taking Arab and Kurdish intentions into account, the groups rebelled. Britain ruthlessly repressed them, sending the Royal Air Force to undertake history's first mass air bombardment of civilians. Then-Secretary of State for War and Air Winston Churchill proposed the use of chemical weapons against Iraq's Kurds, but the technology for aerial deployment of poison gas had yet to be developed. An outraged T.E. Lawrence ("of Arabia") wrote to the *Sunday Times* in 1920, "We have killed ten thousand Arabs in the rising this summer. We cannot hope to maintain such an average: it is a poor country, sparsely populated." The daily *Times*, usually supportive of imperial expansion, noted that Britain was forcing on the Iraqis "an elaborate and expensive administration which they never asked for and do not want."

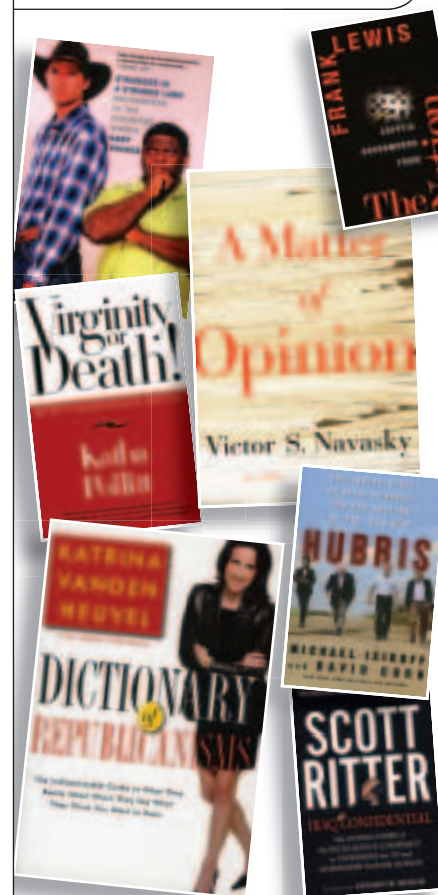
As the Americans did later, the British staged an election—actually a referendum, the model for subsequent electoral frauds in the Arab world—in which 96 percent of voters ostensibly accepted Britain's plans for them. Thus was Prince Faisal, son of Hussein of Mecca, crowned king of Iraq. To the 10,000 dead in 1920, Britain added thousands more, quelling Arab and Kurdish revolts from the 1920s through

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the '40s. In 1958, a year after Britain withdrew its last RAF base from Habbaniya, near Baghdad, a revolution overthrew the monarchy it had imposed. The American invasion and occupation have led to the death of so many Iraqis that the best research to date calculates the number at a minimum of 392,979 and a maximum of 942,636. No one knows how many more will die before the United States retreats or how many will be killed after the last American base shuts down. Thus do empires meddle, cut and run.

It was in part to reverse the catastrophic effects of Iraq's birth that the United States invaded the country in March 2003. Bell, her mentor Sir Percy Cox and other British Orientalists created a self-destructive state that rarely knew peace—enduring countless rebellions, massacres of Assyrians and Kurds in the early years, military coups, more massacres of Shiites and Kurds in later years, torture on an industrial scale, assassination as state policy and a war with Iran that left a million dead. This history culminated in the vicious tyranny of Saddam Hussein, whose contempt for his people's self-determination exceeded that of the British. The Americans, far from undoing the British legacy of bloodshed, have prolonged and intensified it. Britain's unitary Iraqi state may no longer exist, but the legacy of decision-making through violence continues.

Gertrude Bell loved Iraq and wanted the best for its people, as she, rather than they, understood it. In that sense, she was a naïve British version of Paul Wolfowitz. But Wolfowitz was the architect of a war, while Miss Bell designed what was meant to be the peace. Wolfowitz, armed with doctrinal preconceptions, had never lived among Arabs or Kurds. Miss Bell had. She spoke Arabic well and had translated Persian poetry. Unlike Wolfowitz, Miss Bell knew the tribes, family networks, religious hierarchies and landscape of Mesopotamia, Syria and Arabia. For years before the British occupation, she had journeyed there on foot, horse and camel, as she recounted in her memorable 1907 travel book, *The Desert and the Sown*. As a woman alone, she relied for her survival on the hospitality and courtesy of tribal elders—which they freely gave. Yet her motives were more than academic. When the chief of one of Iraq's most important tribes, the Shammar, told her she would be welcomed into all Shammar tents, she wrote home, "Some day I shall profit by the invitation. I like making the acquaintance of these desert lords, it may

always come in useful." Useful for Britain.

She risked her life to study the Arabs, and she became a friend and confidante to many sheiks who did not esteem the female intellect until they met her. (Miss Bell, a prominent member of the Women's Anti-Suffrage League, had as little regard for the intelligence of her sex and makes an unlikely feminist heroine—despite the fact that most of her biographers are admiring women.) Georgina Howell, her latest biographer, notes that Bell wrote of an early expedition among the Kurds that she had "rather lost her heart" to them, but she never persuaded their chiefs that becoming part of Iraq would be good for them. To the end of British rule, they insisted on the independence that the allies had promised them immediately after World War I. She made little headway with the Arab Shiites, writing in 1920, "Until quite recently I've been wholly cut off from [the Shiites] because their tenets forbid them to look on an unveiled woman and my tenets don't permit me to veil." Yet she numbered chiefs of all sects among her friends, including the old Naqib of Baghdad, whom she had known since her 1909 visit to the city. If anyone could cajole and influence the people of what was becoming Iraq, it was this eccentric, willful and intelligent upper-middle-class Englishwoman. She helped Britain to impose the idea of Iraq on recalcitrant peoples; but she failed, as she occasionally conceded in times of crisis, to make British imperium acceptable.

Gertrude Bell's life would have been interesting even without her Iraq adventure, but she might not have been the subject of so many biographies—of which Howell's *Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations* is at least the tenth in English since 1940. (Also published were two volumes of letters and her Arabian diaries.) Miss Bell was a scholar of merit, one of the rare women of her time to take a First Class Honors degree from Oxford, in 1888, and a compelling writer. The daughter of northern industrialists of a liberal bent, she moved easily in the British intellectual circles of her time. Disappointed in love—the two men she desired to marry died, and most of her biographers believe she remained a virgin—she was nonetheless an accomplished archaeologist, explorer and Alpine climber. But for her political engagement in Iraq between Britain's invasion in 1916 and her suicide in 1926, Gertrude Bell would take her place in the parade of English lady travelers, like Lady Hester Stanhope and Jane Digby, who had merely gone to live among the Arabs. As assistant to Sir Percy

Cox, Britain's first High Commissioner over the Mandate in Iraq, Miss Bell used her connections in London and among the country's Arab leaders to establish a state that she imagined would benefit its subjects, and her influence on it was probably greater than that of any other British official. She was a ruthless bureaucratic infighter, seeing off rivals as disparate as the legendary Arabist Harry St. John Philby and the Iraqi Arab nationalist Sayyid Talib Pasha.

During US preparations for the Iraq invasion in late 2002 and early 2003, Iraqis opposed to Saddam Hussein mentioned Gertrude Bell more often than any other British imperial figure. They accused certain American officials of seeking to become the new Gertrude Bell, whose name they used pejoratively. That most Americans had never heard of her indicates that American knowledge of Iraq was intended only to manage its oil, its relationship with Israel and its potential as a long-term military base from which to control the Middle East. With an agenda more limited than Britain's, did Americans need to know, as Miss Bell did, every tribe and all the dialects? Her knowledge did little more for Iraq than America's ignorance, because the operative factor in the relationship between both empires and Iraq was the employment of force. Britain and the United States used it liberally.

Yet Bell's influence on Iraq was in one way more constructive than that of the American occupiers who succeeded the British. The Iraqi National Museum, which looters pillaged in April 2003, while American forces guarded the oil ministry, was her creation. She had cherished Mesopotamia's history as fiercely as she sought to determine its future. The American invasion, seventy-seven years after her death, not only dismantled the unified Iraq she had designed but also destroyed the record of the Iraqi past through the looting of her museum, Halliburton's vandalism at Babylon and Marine graffiti on the zigurat at Ur. Not since the Mongols had invaders shown such disrespect for Mesopotamia's history. As it turned out, there were no American Gertrude Bells willing to salvage and preserve the historical artifacts where humanity's civilized history is said to have begun.

There are many reasons to write a new biography of an old subject: the discovery of new material, developing an original interpretation, placing the life in a fresh context or the desire to write a better book than those that came before.

Howell's *Gertrude Bell* cannot lay claim to any of these, although it is clearly the result of copious research. Published only ten years after Janet Wallach's and in the same year as another Bell biography, by Liora Lukitz, Howell's book adds little to previous works. In her preface, Howell claims that Bell's "voice ought to be heard and appreciated, it seemed to me—which is why I decided to use many more of her own words than would appear in a conventional biography." Yet she does not seem to use many more of Miss Bell's words than did Janet Wallach or H.V.F. Winstone, in his 1978 *Gertrude Bell*. Howell accepts uncritically—as, alas, did most earlier biographers—Miss Bell's interpretation of events as well as her reporting of them.

The story of Iraqi politician Sayyid Talib Pasha is one example. Talib was the son of the Naqib of Basra. During World War I, when Britain was fighting the Ottoman Empire, he had founded an Arab nationalist movement opposed to Turkish rule. Yet he was not as compliant as the British would have liked. Sir Percy Cox, then the British army's political officer in Mesopotamia, had him deported to India in 1916. Talib returned after the British occupied Baghdad in 1917, but he was willing to cooperate with Britain—acting for a time as minister of the interior—so long as Britain kept its promise to grant the country full independence. At a dinner in his Baghdad house in April 1921, Talib told his British and Arab guests, "If the British do not faithfully carry out their pledges, there is the Amir Rabiah with 20,000 tribesmen, and Shaikh Salim and all his tribesmen to ask the reason why." He had criticized a certain British official who was exerting influence to force Iraqis to accept Sherif Faisal of the Hejaz as their future leader. It was a clear reference to Bell.

When the conversation was reported to her the next morning, she wrote immediately to Sir Percy, now the High Commissioner. Cox invited Talib to his house for tea, but he was careful not to be present himself. One of the guests, Major Bovill, left early. After thanking Lady Cox and saying goodbye to Miss Bell, Talib drove away from the house toward the Tigris. Major Bovill was waiting at the bridge. "I regret that I have orders to arrest you," he said. Talib was whisked away, sent to Ceylon and forbidden to return to Iraq. Howell finds no duplicity in this and exonerates Miss Bell for what amounted to the kidnapping of an obstacle to British plans for Talib's country. Referring to "the less salubrious Sayyid Talib," Howell writes, "She [Bell] argued that Talib's

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threats had disqualified him from participating in the democratic process." Democratic process?

Wallach also shared Bell's prejudice, calling Talib a "scurrilous rogue"; but Winstone relied less on his subject's self-excuses: "The arrest was an act of social and political insensibility, and Gertrude's part in it cannot escape criticism any more than can Sir Percy's or Lady Cox's." Howell's—as well as Wallach's and Lukitz's—portrayal of what was fundamentally the British imperial version of Iraq's founding can be explained in part by the acknowledgments in her book. Like other Bell biographers, she thanks libraries, diplomats, officials and scholars in the West. She does not appear to have consulted any Iraqis. Perhaps their version is the one that should be written next.

The first person to tell the story was,

of course, Miss Bell herself. "No life could ever have been better documented than that of Gertrude Bell," Winstone, one of her first male biographers, wrote. "From early childhood to the end of her days she recorded every step, every significant event, in letters to her family and friends." The British National Archives website declares, "The papers consist of sixteen thousand letters, sixteen diaries, seven notebooks and forty-four packets of miscellaneous material." That is in addition to her 7,000 photographs. (Bell's next biographer will find most of these documents at the University of Newcastle in the north of England.) The material is abundant, but so are the biographers. Somehow, Bell's life and her suicide at the age of 57 remain as enigmatic as the insistence of Western powers on their right to intervene in Iraq—no matter what the outcome. ■

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